Sowing seeds of peace. Artwork: Eric Drooker

Using the Internet for advocacy: the ETC perspective

Katherine Morrow

For more than thirty years, Pat Mooney has worked with civil society organisations (CSOs) on international trade and development issues related to agriculture and biodiversity. The author of several books, he is co-founder and Executive Director of ETC Group (formerly Rural Advancement Foundation International - RAFI), a small international CSO addressing the impact of new technologies, especially biotechnologies, on rural communities. "Any major new technology introduced into a society that is not, by its nature, a 'just' society, will exacerbate the gap between rich and poor" is its position as stated in *The ETC Century.*

ETC Group is known for its hard-hitting critique of frameworks for technological innovation that put profit ahead of people. For this reason ETC Group is sometimes seen to be 'anti-technology', but the Group has appropriated information technology and has used it very effectively. The success of the Group's advocacy work depends on credible research, combined with effective and fast dissemination to the media, policymakers, and citizens at large. In addition to offering "cheap mail" for an organisation that consists of seven people located in three countries, information technology plays a key role in every aspect of the Group's strategy. The Internet helps researchers gather evidence and collaborate on papers. It also provides the dominant platform for research dissemination, and for the critical business of supporting the efforts of individuals wishing to voice their concerns in their own countries or at the international level.

In a recent interview Pat Mooney shared his views on information technology and the ways that ETC Group uses the Internet to disseminate research and conduct global advocacy on biotechnology issues. What emerges is a picture of an organisation that has wholeheartedly included the Internet in its communications toolkit, while remaining alert to the limitations of the technology and the problems encountered along the way.

Supporting citizen engagement

The interactive nature of the Internet, the way it enables people to instantly connect with each other, is perhaps its most significant characteristic. CSOs such as Amnesty International have pioneered the use of email and the web to promote citizen engagement through direct action. The Internet is an inexpensive and highly effective tool to support letter-writing campaigns, the gathering of signatures for petitions, donations, and online discussion forums. ETC Group uses basic web technology to help visitors to its website write letters (or emails) of concern to legislators and policymakers.

MOONEY: *We started to use computers back in the early eighties, around 1982, when the first IBM-DOS computers came out. At the time, other groups were horrified that we were actually using computers. We got a lot of criticism for using this "obscene, dangerous" technology. But I think it's fair to say that advocacy organisations have been more effective in using the Internet and computers, than, for example, the corporate world. That may well change in the years ahead, but for the moment, at least, we've gained by it all.*

In our advocacy work, the Internet enables us to do things we couldn't do before, ways of creating interest, discussion and participation. In the 'Take Action' section of our website, we suggest ways that people can put their concern into further action, including model letters. It's been great to be able to say not only "here's some news", but also "here's what you can do about it."

While dynamic websites undoubtedly enhance advocacy efforts, simple email offers a cheap, effective way to communicate directly with decision-makers. In the South, where web access is not widespread, email is more widely available and can be just as effective - when the right message reaches the right person.

MOONEY: *I think many of our southern partners underestimate their capacity to use email to reach policymakers. Most policymakers and their staff have email addresses. They are seeking support and information. Email is a way to*

get critical information to them quickly, for example by sending information to the Agricultural Committee of the local congress or parliament. When a negotiator in an international meeting gets an email message from a CSO back home it counts for something. That message has more impact than if it came from us.

Using the web for publishing and research

Pat Mooney describes the central role of the ETC Group's website as a low-cost publishing tool for the group's research. Publishing on the web allows organisations to disseminate content in less time, and at a lower cost, than is possible with print publication.

Mooney notes, however, that as a tool for researchers, the web presents some drawbacks. One is the tendency of websites to keep only the latest information, discarding their archives. Another problem is that while the web presents a wealth of sources, it is often difficult to assess the quality and reliability of online information. These difficulties point to the need for organisations to put more time into quality control of their websites as well as the need for Internet users to develop specialized online research skills.

> MOONEY: *The Internet has been a critical tool for getting information out about breaking issues and circulating it as fast as possible among our partners in the South. Virtually everything we publish is up on our website before it's available in paper.*
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> *The web is critical for our research function, but whereas we felt pretty relaxed a few years ago, thinking "everything's on the web," we now realise that's not true. One of the shortcomings of the web is the lack of historical information. We've gone back to books and magazines to get a perspective on how things compare over time.*

Measuring impact

Computers originated as number crunchers, and Internet-based tools offer a distinct advantage when it comes to tracking usage data. These data, when analysed, can provide organisations with very detailed quantitative measures related to their online audience.

> MOONEY: *Web statistics allow us to know who is using our information, which is extremely important. We count on average 15,000 people actually downloading data from our website each month, with an even balance between corporations, academia, governments, and civil society groups. We also measure how many other websites link to ours, which I think is a pretty good indicator of impact. The Alta Vista search engine lists 1655 external links, which is high for a civil society organisation of our size.*

Reaching audiences in the south

Adopting the Internet as a primary dissemination tool cannot be done without taking into consideration extremely low rates of access in most of the developing world. Given ETC Group's mandate to address issues that affect farmers in the South, this is a major challenge. The Group frequently relies on telephone for communication with staff in the field, and makes use of Internet-connected partners in the South to relay information to and from the grassroots level. Many international efforts to "bridge the digital divide" give specific priority to improving Internet access and providing technology training to nongovernmental actors working in developing countries, in part due to the critical role these organisations play in ensuring that the concerns of local people are heard internationally.

> MOONEY: *We don't use the Internet as effectively as we could, but that's at least in part because it's much harder to work online if you're in Chiapas, or rural Zimbabwe, or even*

in the middle of a UN meeting in Rome! In the South it's still hard to get online and download information. We depend on our partners in the South to download, print, and disseminate our material. We also encourage them to adapt the material, to make it locally relevant. We don't copyright any of our information. People can take it and use it as they want, translate it and pass it around.

Information overload

MOONEY: One of our frustrations is that the speed of communications cuts into our ability to do research. What's dragging us down, of course, is the amount of email we get. We get hundreds of requests a week. Responding to everyone means less and less time to do research. All of us are cutting back on the number of listservers we're on, preferring to communicate one-on-one and by phone. We've had to develop form responses to email queries; otherwise we'd spend our entire lives answering emails. We have a form letter that says, "Go to our web site and look for these keywords."

Working with the media

No matter what the issue, in order to reach a wide audience it is essential to reach the media. This means developing a relationship of mutual respect and trust with journalists reporting on agricultural and development issues. ETC Group's experience points to the limitations of email in communicating with journalists. Email, an exchange of text between people, lacks the subtlety and richness of face-to-face and telephone interaction. Some situations simply demand more interpersonal contact than email can provide; communicating with journalists seems to be one of them. However, email and the web play an important role in making these relationships more productive by supporting the exchange of background material and the dissemination of press releases.

> MOONEY: *The press rely on one-on-one contact by phone with key parties. We talk to three to five journalists a day, sometimes more. Journalists have to know that they can rely on us for accurate information and good quotes. It's a combination of accurate information, good quotes, and being known in general, not just on the Internet. The more you have that combination, the more they contact you, so success in working with the media is cumulative over time.*

Technology concentration

The ETC Group's broad premise is that it is not technology itself that poses a risk, but the concentration of power over its development and application in society. We asked Pat Mooney to reflect on this premise as it applies to information and communication technology, now and in the future.

> MOONEY: *As time goes on, we see the issues surrounding technology as issues of governance more than anything else. And governance means who controls the media and communications technologies. We are seeing what we describe as the merger of conduit and content. The hardware conduit services of informatics are merging with the content side, so that you have concentration of providers of both the substance and the technologies for communication, for example the AOL-Time-Warner merger. We think that monitoring this is extraordinarily important for the future of good governance and democracy, and for the preservation of dissent.*

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